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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000208

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STATE FOR NEA/ARPI, NSC FOR RAMCHAND, LONDON FOR TSOU,  
PARIS FOR ZEYA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/22/2015  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KU](#) [SUCCESSION](#)  
SUBJECT: PROPOSED JANUARY 24 VOTE ON AMIR-DESIGNATE'S  
HEALTH; DISSOLUTION OF PARLIAMENT RUMORED POSSIBLE

REF: A. KUWAIT 200

[1](#)B. KUWAIT 184 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: DCM Matt Tueller for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The leadership situation in Kuwait is in continual flux with one National Assembly session scheduled for January 24 at 10am to vote on declaring Amir-designate Shaykh Saad Al-Salem medically unfit for office, and another session scheduled for 6:30pm the same day to allow Shaykh Saad to take the constitutionally-mandated Amiri oath. If the two-thirds of Parliament (44 votes) needed to declare the Amir medically unfit is obtained, as is rumored likely, the second session will automatically be negated. Though unlikely, some suggest Shaykh Saad could dissolve Parliament prior to the morning session. The ruling family rift is primarily between leading members of the Al-Jaber and Al-Salem branches (ref A). The majority of Al-Sabah family members support Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah (Jaber) becoming Amir, but a vocal minority led by National Guard Chief Shaykh Salem Al-Ali (Salem), Shaykh Mohammed Al-Khaled (Hamad), and Shaykh Saud Al-Nasser (non-Mubarak descendant) are resisting Shaykh Saad's replacement. Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, long an ardent critic of Jaber domination of political power, is likely holding out for key ministerial portfolios before agreeing to a compromise deal. While Kuwaitis are disappointed (and embarrassed) by the current situation, no one expects the controversy to escalate beyond bitter Al-Sabah infighting. The bright spot in the current controversy is the prevalence of open public debate about the country's leadership and the commitment to following constitutional procedures. End summary.

The Players

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[1](#)2. (C) The current leadership controversy is primarily between the Al-Sabah's leading Shaykhs, though some have suggested several younger Shaykhs are exacerbating the situation (ref A). Prime Minister Shaykh Sabah, the de facto ruler of Kuwait for the past five years, is supported by the majority of the ruling family and is widely expected to prevail in the current dispute. On January 20, 60 leading Al-Sabah family members attended a meeting at the Prime Minister's private residence to express their support for his leadership (ref B). In addition to leading Al-Jabers like the Ministers of Interior, Defense, and Energy, a number of prominent Al-Salems were also present, including Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed and two of Shaykh Salem Al-Ali's sons. Shaykh Sabah supports a close U.S.-Kuwait strategic relationship, and is generally considered as pro- economic and political reform, albeit at a relatively slow pace.

[1](#)3. (C) Leading the opposition to Shaykh Sabah is National

Guard Chief Shaykh Salem Al-Ali, who provoked a national controversy and indirectly criticized the Prime Minister in October 2005 when he called for the creation of a three-member committee to "assist the leadership" of the country. The most senior member of the Al-Salem branch, Shaykh Salem Al-Ali has long agitated against Jaber domination of political power. He is extremely rich, but is known to be somewhat of a miser. Also opposing Shaykh Sabah are Shaykh Mohammed Al-Khaled from the Hamad branch, who was replaced as Interior Minister when Shaykh Sabah became Prime Minister in 2003, and Shaykh Saud Al-Nasser Al-Sabah (not a descendant of Mubarak Al-Kabir), formerly Minister of Oil, Minister of Information, and Kuwaiti Ambassador to the U.S. (Note: One of Shaykh Saud's sons is an Assistant Undersecretary in the Prime Minister's office. End note.)

As Family Negotiations Fail...

14. (C) Negotiations between senior family members on succession appear to have stalled. Last minute mediation efforts on January 22 by a delegation of Al-Sabah family members, which included family heavyweights such as Interior Minister Shaykh Nawaf Al-Ahmed (Jaber), Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed (Salem), Shaykh Mubarak Al-Abdullah (Jaber), and Chairman of the National Committee on Missing and POW Affairs Shaykh Salem Al-Sabah (Salem), to reach an agreement with Shaykh Salem Al-Ali - believed to be the power behind Shaykh Saad - failed when Shaykh Salem Al-Ali left in the middle of the meeting. Some sources say Shaykh Salem Al-Ali is demanding any resolution include agreement on ministerial portfolios, as well as the positions of Amir, Crown Prince, and Prime Minister.

15. (C) Sources report that senior Jaber members Prime

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Minister Shaykh Sabah and Shaykh Mubarak Al-Ahmed met with Shaykh Salem Al-Ali the evening of January 22 to negotiate a compromise. Shaykh Salem Al-Ali proposed two deals. In one, Shaykh Saad would be allowed to take the Amiri oath, then depart the country for medical treatment, appointing Shaykh Sabah Crown Prince and deputizing him as Amir before he left; Shaykh Sabah would also be allowed to retain the Prime Minister position. In exchange, Shaykh Salem Al-Ali demanded the Ministries of Defense, Interior, and Energy for his picks. In the alternative deal, Shaykh Saad would step down, allowing Shaykh Sabah to become Amir in return for Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammed becoming both Crown Prince and Prime Minister. Shaykh Sabah reportedly rejected both of these proposals. (Note: During the January 20 meeting at Shaykh Sabah's residence, family members reportedly agreed on an arrangement whereby Shaykh Sabah would become Amir, Shaykh Dr. Mohammed would become Crown Prince, and Interior Minister Shaykh Nawaf would become Prime Minister. End note.)

...Kuwait Turns to Parliament

16. (C) In a meeting with Shaykh Saad on January 22, National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi agreed to hold a special parliamentary session allowing Shaykh Saad to take the constitutionally mandated Amiri oath at 6:30pm on Tuesday, January 24. The Cabinet, proceeding on a separate track, has scheduled (with parliamentary support) a National Assembly session at 10am the same day to vote on activating Article 3 of the Succession Law to declare Shaykh Saad medically unfit to be Amir. If two-thirds of Parliament (44 votes) vote for the activation, as is rumored likely, the Amiri oath-taking session would automatically be canceled. Some contacts speculate, however, that as a last resort Shaykh Saad (or those acting on his behalf) could move to dissolve Parliament before the 10am session. (Comment: Such a move is highly unlikely. The image-conscious Kuwaitis do not want to be viewed in the region or globally as not being able to resolve the succession issue when other countries in the region have

successfully managed the transition of power following the death of their leaders. End comment.)

¶7. (C) Given the breakdown in negotiations, sources say the Cabinet has no choice but to proceed with activation of Article 3. If Shaykh Saad is removed, the Cabinet can nominate a new Amir, who must be approved by a majority vote (33 votes) in Parliament. It is unclear, however, what would happen if the two-thirds majority (44 votes) needed to remove Shaykh Saad was not obtained. Local media reported that National Assembly Speaker Jassem Al-Khorafi met 33 MPs on January 22 to discuss the parliamentary reaction to the contradictory requests it has received. Sources report Al-Khorafi and a majority of MPs prefer voting to activate Article 3 prior to the special oath-taking session.

#### Political Precedence

¶8. (C) While Kuwaitis are nervous (and embarrassed) by the leadership crisis, no one expects the situation to escalate beyond the bitter infighting within the ruling family. Regardless of the outcome, U.S. interests and the U.S.-Kuwaiti bilateral relationship are unlikely to be significantly affected. Ironically, the leadership crisis may inadvertently set a precedence for parliamentary involvement in choosing the Amir, which could have a long-term impact on political reform in Kuwait.

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